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## The JRTC Patch: Full of Meaning

by  
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FORT POLK, La. - On our new Army combat uniforms (ACUs), two features immediately get the attention of observers. The first involves the digital gray-green camouflage scheme. The rectangular patterns of washed-out pixels look somewhat like your television satellite feed when the dish wobbles in a high wind. It is quite a contrast to the much greener, more flowing woodland shades that marked the former battle dress uniform (BDU).

The second aspect that draws comments concerns the proliferation of Velcro® areas. On the prior field uniform, Soldiers sewed on nametapes, the U.S. Army strip, the American flag, and their ranks. Now those items get emplaced using what the Army refers to as "hook-pile tape" (HPT) fasteners, the preferred military term for Velcro. Originally developed for our astronauts during the days of the Apollo moon program, Velcro has evidently evolved to the point where it merits its own Army acronym.

In any event, some of this HPT now bears the unit patches that distinguish each Soldier's organization. A Soldier wears the unit of assignment on the left sleeve. By regulation, one can also wear a patch on the right side, known officially as the "shoulder sleeve insignia - former wartime service," and unofficially called the "combat patch." Given the multiple and extended tours in the current war, plus previous conflicts in the 1980s and 1990s, many Soldiers have a range from which to select.

Unit patches come in a variety of sizes, shapes, and shades. Being orderly by nature, the Army prefers symmetry and symbolism, with a preference for geometric shapes, bold primary colors, and a display of swords, spears, arrows, and other traditional weapons. On the field uniform, we wear darkened gray, green, and black versions, as bright colors tend to attract enemy snipers. Subdued variants aside, each patch also comes in full color, worn on dress uniforms and prominently displayed in our unit areas. And each patch tells a story. Every element means something.

Consider the patch for the Joint Readiness Training Center (JRTC) and Fort Polk. When you look at it, you see what resembles a doorway, with yellow, blue, and red segments backing a winged yellow sword of some kind, all crowned by a half-moon shaped blue tab that reads “Airborne” in white letters. It’s simple but symbolic.

The overall shape suggests an arched portal, the door to learning, as JRTC trains units how to fight and win. The yellow, blue, and red parts stand for the branch colors of Armor/Cavalry, Infantry, and Artillery, primary colors that mark the premier combat arms that must work together to bring success in battle. The blue segment is shaped like a parachute, as JRTC trains Army paratroopers capable of jumping in to secure key objectives. The gold sword is in fact a bayonet, the Infantry’s final argument for four centuries. It’s colored gold to emphasize the value we place on close combat. The wings that surround the bayonet remind us of the speed, mobility, and firepower of the United States Air Force, the world’s best, always with us in training and in combat. The “Airborne” tab on top tells all that the JRTC Operations Group is jump-qualified, as are many of the units that come here to prepare for missions overseas. Airborne capability allows our observer/controllers to go in by parachute assault with their counterparts in rotational training unit. All of it tells a tale worth knowing.

Most Soldiers realize full well the messages embedded in their unit patches. When you are a long way from home in a fight, sometimes the thing that keeps you going can be as simple as knowing that others have also worn that same patch, and they have done well. So can we. Our patch stands for something bigger than any one of us. Daily, our Soldiers in training and on operations add new meaning to the symbol we so proudly wear.